



# Interstate 15 Corridor Environmental Impact Statement

## Record of Decision

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Prepared for:  
*Montana Department of  
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# **RECORD OF DECISION**

for the  
I-15 CORRIDOR  
Montana City to Lincoln Road  
Jefferson and Lewis & Clark Counties, Montana  
NH 15-4(65)196  
Control Number 1234

Final Environmental Impact Statement  
Final Section 4(f) Evaluation  
FHWA-MT-EIS-03-01-F

US Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration  
Helena, Montana

By: Janice Weingart Brown  
Janice Weingart Brown - Division Administrator

Date: 1/22/04

## DECISION

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) hereby identifies Alternative 1 (Final Environmental Impact Statement - Preferred Alternative) as the Selected Alternative for improvements along the 19-kilometer (12-mile) segment of Interstate 15 (I-15) in Jefferson and Lewis and Clark Counties, Montana. This decision is based on the information presented in the *I-15 Corridor Montana City to Lincoln Road Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) prepared by FHWA and the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), and released for public review on November 21, 2003. The FEIS presents a complete description of the alternatives considered and identifies Alternative 1 as the Preferred Alternative. The FEIS is available for review by request to the MDT.

The Selected Alternative includes a composite of transportation improvements including a new South Helena interchange, a new northern interchange at Custer Avenue and improvements at the existing Capitol and Cedar interchanges. This alternative is designed to optimize corridor transportation improvements while mitigating (avoiding, minimizing and compensating) for adverse impacts as necessary. Five supporting elements enhance this alternative. The major components and supporting elements of the Selected Alternative are:

- ▶ New interchange south of Helena (South Helena Interchange)
- ▶ Interchange improvements at Capitol
- ▶ New interchange at Custer Avenue, including the widening of Custer Avenue to four through lanes between N. Montana Avenue and N. Washington Street with median/turn lanes and provisions for bicycles and pedestrians.
  - ◊ Minor realignment of the east side frontage road at Custer Avenue
- ▶ Construction of additional lanes along I-15 in accordance with the FEIS (see Figure 4-7 in the FEIS).
- ▶ Replacement of the twin I-15 bridges over the Montana Rail Link railroad
- ▶ Supporting elements:
  - ◊ Montana City interchange improvements
  - ◊ Connect west side Frontage Road between Montana City and Colonial Drive
  - ◊ Broadway underpass for pedestrian and bicycle use
  - ◊ Widen Cedar Street to five lanes from I-15 to N. Montana Avenue and some minor widening may be required at the Cedar Street/North Washington Street intersection for additional turn lanes.
  - ◊ Lincoln Road interchange improvements

The process leading up to the FEIS evaluated the two new interchanges and the Capitol and Cedar interchange modifications against the purpose and need and operational criteria. The technical memoranda and FEIS sufficiently document operational and safety considerations and applicable standards to grant a finding of operational acceptability for the new interchanges at South Helena and Custer Avenue, and the interchange modifications at Capitol and Cedar as described for the Selected Alternative. Access approval is hereby granted, conditioned upon development of detailed designs that comply with the commitments in the FEIS and ROD. If

changing conditions occur or new information that affects the project becomes available, a re-evaluation of the FEIS with a new operational analysis may be required.

Since it is not part of the Selected Alternative, interstate access approval for the Forestvale Interchange is hereby withdrawn. Future consideration of interstate access at Forestvale will be cause for a new Federal action, complete with an operational analysis, NEPA process and interstate access approval.

## ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

This Record of Decision (ROD) is based upon analysis and comparison of reasonable alternatives (in addition to a No-Action Alternative) described and evaluated in Chapter 2 of the FEIS. Alternatives considered are as follows:

### No-Action Alternative

The No-Action Alternative would not provide the necessary improvements (design or safety) to the existing I-15 corridor. This Alternative assumed completion of those transportation, development and infrastructure projects that were in progress, or have been programmed by MDT, Lewis & Clark County, Jefferson County, or the city of Helena. These include the projects listed in Table 5-6, Table 5-7, and Table 5-8 of the FEIS.

### Build Alternatives

#### Alternative 1 (SELECTED)

New South Helena Interchange: This new interchange is proposed to be a traditional diamond layout with standard northbound and southbound on and off ramps. This improvement is a new interchange with I-15, designed primarily to address access, mobility, emergency services, and regional planning needs in northern Jefferson County and southern Lewis & Clark County. The proposed new interchange is located approximately 2.7 kilometers (1.6 miles) south of the Capitol interchange.

The new bridge over I-15 will be approximately 18 meters (60 feet) wide to accommodate two travel lanes, a center lane for left turn storage and provide for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Improvements at the Capitol interchange: These improvements provide for the reconstruction of the existing Capitol interchange to address safety, capacity, mobility, and emergency services needs. The Capitol interchange is the single most congested location in the entire corridor and the most frequently identified problem area needing to be corrected. The new interchange bridge will carry three through travel lanes in each direction and a 3.6-meter (12-foot) to 9-meter (30-foot) median to accommodate one or two left turn movements and a raised median. Provisions for pedestrians and bicyclists will be constructed on both sides of the new bridge.

All four ramps serving the interchange will be modified to safely accommodate future traffic volumes. In the northwest quadrant, a new underpass of US 12 will provide southbound I-15 traffic direct access to Colonial Drive.

Westbound traffic on US 12 will access Colonial Drive via a new loop ramp in the northwest quadrant that will connect to the US 12 underpass.

Northbound traffic from Colonial Drive will continue to use 11th Avenue and Fee Street to reach the Capitol interchange. 11th Avenue will be modified between California and Fee Street to include two westbound lanes to accommodate increased traffic volumes. An unrestricted right-turn will be constructed to allow westbound 11th Avenue traffic to turn east on US 12 to get to the Capitol interchange. Colonial Drive will require reconstruction from the US 12 underpass connection south for approximately 427 meters (1,400 feet) to provide a continuous roadway. Modifications to the loop ramp on the east side are also included.

Retaining walls may be required in the northwest and southwest quadrants to minimize right-of-way acquisition requirements. No business or residential structures are anticipated to be relocated with the Capitol interchange improvements. Portions of some parcels may be acquired for right-of-way.

New interchange at Custer Avenue: This improvement includes the widening of Custer Avenue to four travel lanes between N. Montana Avenue and N. Washington Street with median/turn lane(s) and bicycle/pedestrian provisions. The new interchange would primarily address access, capacity, mobility, emergency services, and local and regional planning needs in Helena and Lewis & Clark County. The new interchange will be a partial cloverleaf layout.

The new Custer Avenue bridge will have two travel lanes in each direction and a center lane to accommodate left turn storage. Provisions for pedestrians and bicyclists will be constructed on either or both sides of the bridge and along Custer Avenue. Custer Avenue will be widened to accommodate four travel lanes from N. Washington Street on the east to N. Montana Avenue on the west and will include a 3.6-meter to 7.3-meter (12-foot to 24-foot) median/turn lane(s) plus the bicycle/pedestrian provisions. Final design will determine the exact configuration. The intersection of Custer Avenue and N. Washington Street will be improved to accommodate future traffic and the new typical section for Custer. Westbound Custer Avenue to southbound I-15 traffic will access the interstate via a new loop ramp in the northwest quadrant of the interchange.

The intersection of Custer Avenue and N. Montana Avenue will require improvements to maximize the efficiency of turning movements and accommodate the additional laneage east of the intersection. Curb, gutter, sidewalk, and turning lane improvements will be provided along Custer Avenue from N. Montana Avenue to N. Washington Street. Other elements required with this new interchange are:

- ▶ Construction of additional lanes along I-15 in accordance with the FEIS (see Figure 4-7 in the FEIS).
- ▶ Minor realignment of the east side Frontage Road at Custer Avenue.
- ▶ Replacement of the twin I-15 bridges over the Montana Rail Link railroad to accommodate the additional lanes.
- ▶ Coordination for construction of drainage improvements as defined in Section 2.8.2.3 of the FEIS.

The following supporting elements will be constructed as defined in Section 2.8.4 of the FEIS:

- ◊ Lincoln Road interchange improvements,
- ◊ Montana City interchange improvements,
- ◊ Connect west side Frontage Road between Montana City and Colonial Drive,
- ◊ Widen Cedar Street to five lanes from I-15 to N. Montana Avenue,
- ◊ Broadway underpass for pedestrian and bicycle use.

Due to funding constraints, phasing of improvements of the Selected Alternative will occur.

## **Alternative 2**

Alternative 2 differs from Alternative 1 in two major aspects. The first difference is the location of a new northern interchange at Forestvale Road, rather than at Custer Avenue. The second is in the number and length of the additional lanes required to support each build alternative. This alternative is enhanced by including the same five supporting elements as identified previously to complete the proposed improvements under Alternative 1. The major components of Alternative 2 are:

- ▶ New South Helena Interchange: (identical with Alternative 1).
- ▶ Improvements at the Capitol interchange (identical with Alternative 1).
- ▶ New interchange at Forestvale Road: This improvement is a new interchange at Forestvale Road and I-15, designed primarily to address access, mobility and emergency service needs in the North Helena Valley. The proposed new interchange is a traditional diamond layout with standard northbound and southbound on- and off-ramps.
  - ◊ Construction of additional lanes in accordance with the FEIS (see Figure 4-7 in the FEIS).
  - ◊ Replacement of the twin I-15 bridges over the Montana Rail Link railroad to accommodate the additional lanes.
- ▶ Supporting elements: (identical with Alternative 1)

## **Environmentally Preferred Alternative**

Based on the analysis presented in the FEIS, Alternative 1, the Selected Alternative is the Environmentally Preferred Alternative since it has fewer environmental impacts than Alternative 2. Alternative 1 has less impact on prime or unique farmland, air quality, floodplains, water quality and wetlands when compared to Alternative 2. The No-Action Alternative does not meet the purpose and need.

## **SECTION 4(f) EVALUATION**

No impacts to any public parks, wildlife refuges, recreational areas or trails were identified that require evaluation under Section 4(f).

Fifty prehistoric and historic sites were identified and evaluated within the study area. Of these, six are located within the Area of Potential Effect and are either listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Each of these resources was evaluated for potential direct and indirect impacts under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966, as amended.

The Selected Alternative will impact only one of the historic properties assessed. This property is the Northern Pacific Railroad, Site 24LC1139. Placement of new bridge piers within the boundaries of the historic railway property will be required with the Selected Alternative (and Alternative 2). Evaluation of the impacts is discussed in Section 6.3.3 of the FEIS. Alternatives to avoid impacts and measures to minimize harm are identified in Sections 6.5.1 and 6.5.2. Required coordination is discussed in Section 6.6. There are no feasible and prudent alternatives to the use of land from the Northern Pacific Railroad property.

## MITIGATION

All practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the Selected Alternative have been adopted. Mitigation measures adopted to minimize harm to the environment were discussed in detail in Chapter 5.0 of the FEIS. The selected measures to minimize harm are briefly described below.

**Land Use** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified.

**Seismic Considerations** - To mitigate seismic impacts to structures under MDT's jurisdiction, all transportation structures constructed as part of the Selected Alternative will be designed in accordance with current AASHTO criteria.

**Farmlands** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified.

**Social** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified.

**Right-of-Way and Utilities** - All real property interests needed for this project will be acquired in accordance with both the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-646 as amended), and the Uniform Relocation Act Amendments of 1987 (P.L. 100-17).

**Economic Conditions** - Any signs or landscaping displaced by construction will be replaced as coordinated between MDT and the landowner.

**Air Quality** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified.

**Noise** - Noise mitigation will be further defined by MDT during the final design process. Required mitigation will be in accordance with Section 5.3.9.3 of the FEIS and existing MDT noise policy.

**Water Resources/Water Quality** - All work in and adjacent to wetlands and water resources will follow state, federal, and local permit requirements. Mitigation measures that will be implemented during construction to minimize impacts to water resources include:

-A Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) employing Best Management Practices (BMPs) for controlling erosion and sediment transport will be implemented in the project area.

-Development of a revegetation plan, erosion control plan, and stormwater pollution prevention plan will be coordinated with appropriate permitting and resource agencies.

**Wetlands** - The estimated wetland impacts (0.5 hectare [1.2 acre]) are based on conceptual design and have been avoided and/or minimized as much as can be determined with the conceptual design. Avoidance and minimization of wetland impacts will continue in final design. Compensatory mitigation for loss of wetlands will be pursued under the MDT Interagency Wetland Group operating procedures.

The following general measures will be required to minimize disturbance of wetlands and other Waters of the U.S. during construction:

- Acceptable erosion control devices and Best Management Practices (BMPs) will be installed at the edges of wetlands and other Waters of the U.S. prior to construction.
- All exposed soils will be permanently stabilized at the earliest practicable date.
- BMPs will be included in the design of this plan using guidelines as established in MDT's Erosion and Sediment Control BMP Reference and Field Manual.
- Regular inspections of erosion control devices will be carried out in compliance with MPDES regulations.
- Temporarily disturbed wetland areas will be revegetated with desirable species as specified by MDT at the earliest practicable date following disturbance and comply with MPDES and Section 404 permit conditions.

Monitoring will be conducted on all wetland mitigation sites as necessary.

**Vegetation, Wildlife and Aquatic Resources** - Raptor proofing of rural overhead power lines that are relocated in association with the project will be included in accordance with MDT policies.

- Appropriate measures will be taken to prevent the introduction or spread of noxious weeds. In accordance with 7-22-2152 MCA and 60-2-208 MCA, MDT will re-establish a permanent desirable vegetation community along all areas disturbed by construction of the Selected Alternative. A set of re-vegetation special provisions will be developed by qualified MDT personnel that must be followed by the construction contractor. The seeding provisions developed for the project will be forwarded to the responsible county weed board for approval.
- Additionally, a special provision is typically included in bid documents that reminds contractors to comply with the MDT Standard Specification for Noxious Weed Management.

**Floodplains** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified.

**Wild and Scenic Rivers** - There are no wild and scenic rivers in the project area.

**Threatened or Endangered Species** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified. Conservation measures are contained in Table 5-10 of the FEIS.

**Cultural Resources** - In the event that previously unrecorded material is found during construction, activities in the immediate area will be halted, and appropriate personnel at MDT will be contacted to assess the find.

**Hazardous Waste** - To mitigate direct impacts to hazardous waste sites, further environmental investigation of the properties with potential environmental risks will be conducted prior to construction of the Selected Alternative.

-Construction workers will be made aware of the lead concentrations in the soil and will take precautions to minimize dust generation and utilize dust control measures during construction activities.

-If the removal of any underground storage tanks (USTs) and/or UST systems is required, the removal work will be conducted in accordance with the Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) Title 17, Chapter 56, Sub-Chapter 7, Rule 17.56.702, Permanent Closure and Changes-In-Service

-Special provisions will detail proper handling of anticipated and unanticipated contaminated materials during the construction phase of the project. A site-specific Health and Safety Plan will be required as part of the contractor submittals for work involving known contaminated material.

**Visual** - Mitigation measures for direct impacts to the visual character of the I-15 Corridor and newly constructed or widened cross streets include:

-Provide architectural interest or color into retaining wall design, bridges and other structural features.

-All new structures, signing, lighting, etc. related to future highway improvements will be consistent with local standards and guidelines, and MDT safety specifications.

-Revegetate disturbed areas as soon as practicable, consistent with adjacent landscape features and with desirable species as specified by qualified MDT personnel, while still adhering to safety requirements necessary in clear zones.

-Coordinate with local municipalities and landowners to replace important landscaping features lost due to construction.

**Parks and Recreation Resources** - None - no impacts requiring mitigation were identified.

**Construction Mitigation:**

Air Quality;

-Suppress dust through watering or dust palliative.

-Re-vegetate areas disturbed by clearing and grubbing activities.

-Minimize off-site tracking of mud and debris by stabilizing temporary construction access roads.

Noise;

-Coordination between MDT, the contractor, and residents or business owners to limit these impacts to certain times of day.

-Minimize construction duration in residential areas, as much as possible.

-Avoid nighttime activities in residential areas, as much as possible.

-Re-route truck traffic away from residential streets, where possible.

-Combine noisy operations to occur in the same period.

-Conduct pile driving and other high-noise activities during daytime construction (generally 7am to 7pm), where possible.

Water Quality;

-Implement temporary and permanent BMPs for drainage way protection and erosion and sediment control as required by local and state permitting requirements.

-Avoid indirect and temporary impacts to wetlands or other areas of important habitat value in addition to those impacted by the project itself.

-Temporary and permanent BMPs may be required as mitigation along Custer Avenue to prevent erosion and sedimentation in the wetlands on the north and south side of the street between N. Montana Avenue and I-15 and to prevent spilled fuels or other hazardous materials from entering the wetlands.

-Coordination with local water districts to ensure water flow in the canal will be uninterrupted during construction at Lincoln Road. Temporary and permanent BMPs may be required along the canal to prevent erosion and sedimentation caused by stormwater runoff and to prevent spilled fuels or other hazardous materials from entering the canal.

Traffic Control;

- Develop traffic management plans.
- Coordinate with emergency service providers to minimize delays and ensure access to properties.
- Maintain traffic flow during peak travel times by minimizing lane closures, if possible.
- Coordinate detour routes to avoid overloading local streets with detour traffic, where possible.
- Maintain reasonable access to local businesses and residences.
- Use signage, T.V. and radio announcements to announce and advertise timing of road closures.
- During peak travel times, keep as many lanes as possible open by temporarily shifting lanes within the existing framework of the roadway.
- Develop detour routes for potential nighttime closures of I-15 and arterial roadways.

Visual;

- Store equipment and materials in designated areas only.
- Remove any unused detour pavement or signs.

## COMMENTS ON THE FINAL EIS

A Notice of Availability (NOA) of the FEIS was announced in the *Helena Independent Record*, the *Jefferson County Courier*, the *Boulder Monitor*, and local electronic media. The NOA also was published in the Federal Register on November 21, 2003. A notification of the availability of the FEIS was mailed to those on the project mailing list in Newsletter #7. In addition, this information was made available through the project Internet site and the project telephone hotline.

The FEIS was available for a 30-day public review period commencing on November 21, 2003, and concluding on December 22, 2003. The FEIS was distributed for official review to the federal, state, and local agencies listed in Chapter 9.0 of the FEIS, to members of the public at their request who could not utilize the formal viewing locations, and to the Advisory Committee members listed in Table 7-3 of the FEIS. The FEIS also was made available for the 30 days at 12 viewing locations (see FEIS for viewing locations).

Forty comment letters, 27 form letters and one petition with 683 signatures were received from the general public and various agencies during the 30-day comment period. Those comments and the responses are included as Attachment A to this ROD.